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Hall's "Living wisely with the church fathers" (book review)

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Book Reviews



Hall, C. A. (2017). *Living wisely with the church fathers*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP. 274 pp. \$17.34. ISBN 9780830851881

Christopher A. Hall is distinguished professor of theology and director of academic spiritual formation at Eastern University. Hall's latest volume, *Living Wisely with the Church Fathers*, is the fourth and final instalment in a series written on the church fathers. Previous volumes include subjects such as exegesis, theology, and prayer. In this volume, he examines closely the ethics of the church fathers (p. 3).

Hall's thesis is that to live wisely with the church fathers is to become "ever more like Jesus, to act as his mind, eyes, mouth, ears, hands, and feet in the world. For the fathers, the good life was Jesus' life lived through them; they desired to become 'little Christs' in the time and space God had given them to live" (p. 23). This book is intended to be a reasonably short and accessible handbook on the church fathers for a popular audience. Furthermore, Hall's desire is that this volume would serve as an introduction for further study, specifically as a companion to the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture series, which is a project his late mentor, Thomas C. Oden, edited (p. 1).

Hall observes that for the church fathers, reading and meditating on Scripture was the recommended practice to aid in the development of one's Christian character and for living a good life (p. 9). In addition, he observes that one's moral character is best formed through Godly habits (p. 11). However, it is not enough to merely understand the nature of good moral character, but one must practice the desired moral character in order to live a good life. Hall also observes that for the church fathers, it was essential to identify "wise and skillful physicians of the soul, tutors of the good life who can guide, discipline, model, and encourage us to live good lives, with Jesus as our chief teacher and example" (p. 13). For Hall, it is important to note that the church fathers did not practice living a good life so that they might earn something from God, rather the good life provided a visible manifestation of a relationship with God (p. 15).

Hall relies upon the church fathers' use of *the passions* as a way of diagnosing "what's gone wrong with human beings" (p. 17). In other words, to the "vices that cripple our ability to pray and to live life well" (p. 17). Each chapter of the book addresses

various topics which include potential passions to avoid. For example, wealth, death, sex, and entertainment. It is the passions which “cripple our ability to think and live in line with life as God has designed it to work” (p. 19). According to Hall, one removes “the passions through the practice of key spiritual disciplines such as prayer, silence, solitude, and simplicity ensures the stability and strength that leading a good life before God demands” (p. 18). Furthermore, reading and meditating on Scripture is the antidote for the disease of the passions. The church fathers taught that when one allows themselves to be governed “by our passions, our reasoning about and response to life will inevitably be distorted and twisted; we will lack the eyes to discern truly what God is up to in the world” (p. 20). Thus, living wisely is to be understood by the deepest desire to become “ever more like Jesus” (p. 23).

This book achieves its agenda and provides a helpful introductory resource for anyone seeking to understand the ethics of the church fathers. In addition, Hall has provided detailed and thorough endnotes which support his various claims and provide resources for further study.

Reviewer

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